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ABSTRACT

This paper presents aspects of a study in progress on the legitimate function of fiction in research. A section on methodology describes how the study started with a project of narratives written in response to the black and white photographs of one of the collaborators. Analysis of the response process revealed a connection between fiction and truth. As the project evolved and was critiqued, the focus changed and transcriptions from presentations, stories from other doctoral students, and an eclectic group of readings moved the study from the concrete response to the photographs and narratives to the theoretical, eclectic, and philosophical. The next section describes how the study evolved and was reinterpreted in response to the specific comments of others regarding executing the work, researching for meaning, continuing the execution, acting as teacher researchers, and researching the research. A section on the researchers' own agenda touches on crafting, the ethics and aesthetics of fiction, and the function of fiction. A conclusion poses some seminal questions for future discussion and suggests that fiction can be an alternative way to meet the needs of researchers wishing to articulate sensitive issues or convey what literal language cannot. A photograph that was the basis of interpretive stories is included. (Contains 85 references.) (JB)

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THE TRUTH ABOUT FICTION

IN OUR OWN WRITE

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The Truth About Fiction: In Our Own Write

Introduction

This will be a collaborative presentation. Deirdre DeCarion, a former teacher from Connecticut, is working on a doctoral thesis in the Joint Centre for Teacher Development (JCTD) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada. She is the chief editor for ACT, a journal written by teachers for teachers, distributed through JCTD, and is also well known for her black and white photography. Barbara Barter, who is also a student from JCTD, is completing a doctoral thesis in labour relations and its affects on teachers. She is the principal of a rural high school in Newfoundland, Canada and has several publications to her credit concerning teachers and their perspectives of inservice, creativity and the arts, dance education, and the importance of drama in the classroom.

Since our study is a work in progress, we would like to share our current work on the legitimate function of fiction in research and facilitate interactive feedback from the audience.

Images: Visual Realities and Generated Narratives

In a former paper, image generated narratives were used to establish a relationship between fiction and truth. Photographs have historically had the status of fact, and as Berger and Mohr (1982) explain, when something is visible it is fact and facts, from a positivistic perspective, contain the only truth. A camera can give authenticity to any set of appearances. The photographs were agents of response which "beg for interpretation" (ibid). For us, the photographs provided an excellent medium

for the inquiry in that compared to other forms of communication, intentionality is weak[1].

The narratives which developed for us and through us were imaginative, the language uninhibited, yet grounded in the reality of past experiences. Through the sharing of our narratives the notion of the validity of fiction was articulated and led to the development of our claim that fiction is a legitimated mode of research.

Significance of the Study

The function of fiction in the thesis is to allow researchers to tell the truth. It is our premise that fictional texts allow more depth, freedom, and exploration for the author to translate knowing into telling. The use of fiction gives voice to those who might in other research circumstances not get the opportunity to do so. As an intentional and conscious invention fiction allows for authentic expression, that is to say, a way through which participants can express experiences and concerns. It appears that the face of ethnography has evolved from the study of cultures, to institutions, to individuals, to self. This paradigm shift indicates that research issues have become more personalized and sensitive, signalling the need for alternative methods of reporting or presenting, or representing issues rather than leaving areas of knowledge untapped.

Besides the question of traditional/conventional research and its perceived legitimacy, we wish to extend some boundaries. We believe that fiction is, can, and should be used in research. Its importance lies in its ability to involve educators in discourse of real social, moral, and educative (or miseducative) issues. The writing of this paper has offered us the opportunity to re-search our research. What is of significance to us is that both fiction and truth are presentations and re-

[1]For a detailed description on photography and intentionality see Berger and Mohr (1982).

presentations of reality. We wish to push the boundaries of context, rhetoric and discourse. We wish to explore the craft of fiction in the research text and yet create a boundary within the dimensions of fictional aesthetics and ethics. We also wish to investigate further the notion of ethics and aesthetics in fiction to articulate social conscience within the educational literature.

Methodology

Our collection of data involved and continues to involve a variety of techniques. The first project[2], The Truth About Fiction, which began in the winter of 1992, took the form of a chronicle/journal. We taped and journaled our meetings and discussions. The `truth about fiction' evolved through narratives constructed by responses to black and white photographs of one of the collaborators. Analysis of the process revealed the connection between fiction and truth. Responses from seminars were collected. Interpretation was achieved collaboratively, a process that initiated the inquiry and continues to motivate our research. Our thesis advisor, Dr. Michael Connelly, provided us with a detailed critique of the initial project that revolutionized our focus and approach. During the second stage of the project tapes from presentations at CSSE conferences were transcribed. Stories from other doctoral students struggling with ethical issues have become part of the data. We have also been immersed in an eclectic assemblage of readings. Hence, our methodology has shifted from the concrete of the photographs and narratives to the theoretical, eclectic, and philosophical. We still consider the photographs and narratives to be the foundation of the study. But, we believe that we have moved to another dimension.

[2]When we worked on the first project there were three of us: Barbara Barter, Deirdre DeCarion, and Maureen Dunne. Any reference to the first project includes Maureen's participation.

Our point of departure for this paper is spurred by questions and comments from the proposal review committee. We felt that their questions and comments were valuable in that some requested clarity which was warranted while others we have challenged.

Re-interpreting Through Interpretations of Others

Executing the Work

One of the concerns expressed by the review committee was how the work was executed. Explaining this will clarify how we related the photographs to the stories and how this validated the relationship of truth to fiction. The focus involved interpreting the photographs/making meaning of what was there.

On 27/1/93 we attended a works in progress seminar. We had just finished listening to a presentation on story telling and many interesting ideas evolved around research into story as definition and methodology. Her stories find her, the presenter said. How does one elicit stories from others? was one question. A discussion of the re-telling of stories for meaning and interpretation gave rise to the idea of re-photographing for meaning and interpretation. What is the relationship between the visual and the written story, we wondered?

Deirdre shared her desire to continue her narrative in a more visual form. Since the narrative was a portrait and followed an art metaphor, an inclusion of interpretive art in the form of photography seemed natural. The idea to re-photograph for meaning and interpretation was to be experimented with. It was suggested that Barbara take some photographs with the intention of helping Deirdre find a "thread" for her work. Both wrote interpretations of the same photograph. Deirdre's story was based on an actual experience with the subject. We categorized this to be the non-

fiction version. The fictionalized version was written by Barbara after seeing the photograph for the first time.

The respondent's story was an imaginative one. Because she had no knowledge of the subject in the photograph she drew on her own experiences to make meaning. Both stories were taken into a seminar to be read for the first time, one writer reading her story to the other, often with other listeners present. Both stories were discussed for their similarities and differences. What responses were elicited by the stories also became a significant part of the research which will be discussed later. A copy of the photograph which was used is appended. Here are the stories which were written, followed by an analysis.

Barbara's Story

Life is full of mystery and making bubbles is one of them. Why is it that when you put your mouth close to the plastic ring and gently blow, something full and transparent fills a circle in the air? I say transparent but it is not, really, is it? If you look carefully you will see the rainbow type of coloring you get when looking at oil on water. There is no color but there is color. You see the greens, blues and pinks temporarily. Bubbles are like that, temporary, I mean. Just thin films of air enveloping emptiness.

They are so delicate, so fragile that, if touched, they burst into nothingness, a sunray of water, and then, gone. There is no anger. They are unable to be aggressive. Forced air merely makes the bubbles disappear faster. Tiny clusters of them only make them more bubbly. If you blow upward they may last longer. The higher they go, the further they have to fall and their flight is not heavy, it's feathery.

I look into the colored liquid in my bottle. I can bury my thoughts there, allow them to float away and burst. Each time I place the ring to my mouth I am surprised at how each shape can be different, some faster and smaller, others in clusters, and the special ones. Those that I get control of and fill with air like blowing up a balloon, some of them becoming so big that they wet my face when they burst. If they are really first-class bubbles I can carry them for awhile, attached to the ring which helped to form them. And with movement they kind of glide and delicately bounce without breaking away from their attachment, allowing themselves to be manoeuvred serenely back and forth in the air. Or, if I blow just right they will come out in a string, like memories, one touching and pushing the other until I have no air left. I try really hard, but there is just no more left. Yet, I have a whole bottle ahead of me so there is no need to fret.

It's life in a bottle. When I grow up I'm not going to be unhappy or sad. Each melancholy bubble will be blown to the wind, surfaced to the ring held in my hand and let go to float until they burst into oblivion. I think of my mother, she has her bottle of bubbles clasped tightly in her hand.

She can blow her melancholy to the wind. Why, then does she choose to hang on? Is there so much power in her bottle of bubbles that it forces her to stay? Why does she think that she cannot shape her own bubbles? Who has told her that she has to live this way? I am too young to understand, my grandmother tells me. I am too young to question. But, as I hold the ring in my hand and shape my mouth to blow, I lose myself into my thoughts and I know that I am not too young. I am simply looking through the liquid in my own bottle. So I shape my memories into bubbles and let them burst.

Deirdre's Story

When Karin was about three years old, I was walking with her on a sidewalk when all of a sudden she stopped as an ant crossed our path. She stared, motionless. With no warning she picked up her tiny foot and before I had a chance to stop her, she put an immediate end to the life of the ant. As she looked at its lifeless, flattened, body whose eight little legs were all contorted out of shape, she began to cry. The consequence of that action was not a part of Karen's knowledge at that time in her very young life. My words were of no consolation.

In her innocence, her naivete, so typical of young children she committed an act which caused the death of another creature. She payed dearly that afternoon. She thought she could bring it back to life.

During my adolescence I had a similar experience. Even though I was older, I did not understand the consequence of my action either. In our adult lives I believe that some of us still harbor a childlike innocence but we have added the wisdom of consequence to our actions.

Perhaps in this photograph I was trying to capture that innocence before we recognize the wisdom of consequence and the responsibility of adulthood.

Re-searching for Meaning

Deirdre, through questioning, indicated that she was upset because Barbara focused on the bubbles instead of the child. Barbara could not understand how Deirdre could write about the child killing an ant and then feeling badly for her actions. The two proceeded to explain to each other, and to the group, why each had written what they had.

Barbara focused on the bubbles, she said, because the child's face and eyes reflected a sadness, a pensiveness which forced a concentration on suspended time. The bubbles were where the little girl's thoughts were. Deirdre, on the other hand, recounted an experience she had had while with the

child. One, she said, she thought would portray the sensitivity of the child as she knew her. What ensued in discussion indicated that Barbara was closer to reality in that Deirdre disclosed the child was living a traumatic experience through the divorce of her parents at the time the photograph was taken.

The difference between them is found in time. Barbara used the present image in the photograph to recount a story from her own past. She did not know the child's past. Deirdre went into the past to tell of an event that had actually occurred with the child.

The similarities are found in the themes of innocence and sadness, of being too young to know, to understand, to grasp what adults grasp. Or, if they do know, to do so in a different way. There was a strong emotional response from both Barb and Deirdre probably because both of their stories were based on personal experiences. These responses also extended to the audience and were verified through transcriptions of conversations and the writing of two audience members.

It was noted how powerful an image can be in the drawing out of emotions which were articulated in the narratives. In our view, from this data, human emotions are universal. They are part of the narrative world. Whether the narratives are fiction or non-fiction is irrelevant.

Continuing the Execution

On 3/2/93 one of the presenters reported on the status of her thesis. During the discussion a problem arose concerning the identity of one of her participants. She expressed the need to `fictionalize' this character in her narrative in order to maintain the integrity of the process. At this point in the discourse, unaware of its presence, the thread began to appear: validity vs. falsifiability; fiction vs. non-fiction. Are real examples written as fiction more valid than non-fiction? If

imagination is a key element in writing and interpretation, does creating a fictional identity and context qualify as a valid reporting of research data? What we took with us was the term 'fictionalize'. Not only did it suggest a concept in research, it also suggested the crafting of a research text. This is what lead us to think about the relationship between the stories and the photographs in that the photograph is a fact and a story is perceived as fiction.

In our view, a photograph is a form of fiction, it is both object and subject. Even though it is a fact, it is still a fiction because we do not know the stories behind the context. We must create the stories which have truth for us. The medium gives authenticity to the appearance but that appearance doesn't necessarily have to be a truth. It can be set up, manipulated as in "morphing". For us, photographs are both truth and fiction at the same time. Even though the subject in the photograph is a fact, someone's interpretation of it is both a fiction and a truth, fiction in that the respondent lacks the "facts" of the subject, truth in that the respondent is forced to draw on personal experiences in order to interpret what is in the photograph through narrative. The very nature of the photograph gives evidence of a connection between truth and fiction.

We met again on 18/2/93 to discuss how we could proceed. We knew we needed to formulate some assumptions and establish a statement of intent. We would investigate the following assumptions:

That truth (fact) and fiction are interrelated;
That fiction is as valid as non-fiction;
That fiction is an object of inquiry;
That the use of fiction in research is a method of inquiry.

Our intent in that inquiry was to bring into focus the aforementioned assumptions through the process of interpretive visual art and as Barthes (1977) would say, "inscribe ourselves somewhere." Only time, inquiry, rigor, and collaboration would expose the triumphs and defeats.

We[3] employed a variety of research strategies. The process, the learning and the method evolved from one another in an extremely interactive way. We chose the photographs and wrote stories about them. Barb and Maureen wrote fictionalized stories, Deirdre wrote the non-fiction version and we examined the "truth" of the two. We shared these stories and engaged in discussion about them. We wrote narratives about the story-writing or photo-taking. We invited participant-observers into our discussions and learned from and responded to their input. We took field notes and taped the discussions. The tapes were transcribed and were examined for patterns of themes, for new meanings, for meanings that hung just below the surface, not detected in the initial exchanges. We consulted the literature on fiction, non-fiction, and collaboration. Each person within the group decided on a specific area according to her talent and interest, thus honouring the collaborative process. The final product of that initial project took the form of a seminar presentation at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto and a term paper.

Teachers as Researchers

A second concern of the reviewers centred around teacher as researcher. One reviewer wrote:

> This was/is a very interesting concept. It was difficult to see the way in which this presentation would connect to teachers as researchers in a concrete way. Perhaps a specific sample or example of this in an applied situation would clarify your approach.

Since this was the only committee review rejection we feel that it warrants being addressed.

First of all, we are teachers with many years of experience. Teaching as well as learning is a life long process which becomes part of one's personality, part of one's identity. As researchers we have to be careful not to draw such a sharp line between the teacher and the researcher. As people

[3]In the initial project there were three researchers.

teachers share an equal footing with researchers. The difference between them is that researchers publish their work while teachers incorporate it into their practice.

Secondly, our presentation concerns the use of fiction in research. One of its main points is that fiction allows the freedom for teachers to tell the truth and, in turn, for researchers to report those truths. We feel that there are educational issues which are not reported because of their personal, delicate and sometimes controversial nature. Teachers have a lot to gain with our approach not only in being able to freely talk about the issues but also effect change as a result of open discourse.

Thirdly, teaching as a life long process involves social, moral, and political goals as well as instructional ones. In this presentation we offer teachers an alternate means to explore, through imagination and reality, those `other' goals which are often masked or obscured because of their personal nature. Our consciousness of these goals are equally important to the personal and academic success of our students.

Fourthly, and most important is the collaborative nature of this event. This presentation itself is an example of our approach. The inopportunity for interactive intellectual discourse in this lonely profession of ours is all too prevalent. Our present view is that the `learning' from the term `collaborative learning' has been lost and needs to be re-examined. Collaboration has assumed a friendly work together connotation. Teachers as researchers and researchers as teachers must have the opportunity to engage in discourse that fosters self-reflection, the result of which is the reconstruction of meaning and knowledge.

Researching The Research

In our proposal we had stated that "the writing of this paper has offered us the opportunity to re-chart our research". We found it interesting to have it transformed by one of the reviewers to read "researching the research". This reviewer expressed an interest in our defining this idea.

In an earlier section of this paper we went into detail on how the initial project had been executed. It was interesting how, when we thought the term paper and seminar were completed so was our project and our writing. But, as Dewey (1934:169) explains "[E]very closure is an awakening, and every awakening settles something". As we stated in the conclusion of our proposal, we find ourselves opening old doors in new ways. Each presentation and each paper written creates new dimensions for us to explore. We have gone from teacher education, to collaboration, photography, literature, to ethics, and aesthetics in validating our research on fiction. As questions develop we find ourselves returning to one of these areas in search of answers, that is to say, our research is continually being researched.

Our Own Agenda

Crafting

The notion of crafting is one that is debated by many including the two writers of this paper. Through our dissonance in trying to come to terms with what crafting means, we have come to believe that its process, product, and significance may be as diversified as research itself. From the method that is chosen by the researcher to the master crafting of a finished product is affected by what is said and how it is written. What is put into a thesis and what is left out are major decisions which have to be made throughout the composing of a text. Theses, for example, are constructed

and reconstructed until they reach a point of acceptance by, not only the author, but also the committee members.

The literature on crafting any thesis is scant. The task becomes even more difficult when considering the idea of fictionalizing a thesis. Therefore, we are in risky and uncharted territory. The question is how does one craft a fictional research thesis?

We have come to recognize that there are degrees of fictionalizing. We also acknowledge that fictionalizing, to some extent is present in all theses. Imagine fictionalizing as a continuum whose minimum is changing names and maximum is animation. What we want to do is go beyond the mid-point of the continuum towards the extreme degrees to explore the crafting of this kind of thesis. Somewhere on the high degree of this continuum lies the novel, a suggested genre for a thesis by qualitative researchers such as Eisner (1992) and Coles (1989). At this point we need to consider the question of validity. What happens to validity as we move along the continuum? In terms of moving along this continuum, also, how much disclosure has to be made? If the researcher tells the audience that the thesis is a fiction how does that affect the reader? In a class discussion on validity one student remarked that she enjoys reading fiction because she does not have to be concerned about its validity. Should we be able to do the same in a thesis? Are we capable of reading a thesis as a novel?

The Ethics and Aesthetics of Fiction

There are two dimensions of fiction[4], one is ethics and the other is aesthetics. Ethics refers to the researcher's responsibility not to deceive and not to harm. The ethical problem in traditional research is found in the methodology and its outcomes. Part of our methodology included the use of photographs. It was after the narratives were created that we realized how powerful the photographs were in evoking these narratives.

It is common knowledge that researchers go through a process of having to make ethical decisions. Because of public access to published theses protection of participants is paramount. Can the participant be identified? How much harm will/can come to the participant in the aftermath of the study? What consequences may participants have to face? At what price do researchers report data? Ethical decisions and the degree of fictionalizing depend on the nature of the issues which have evolved from a `romanticized' view of teaching to a view of what "is" happening in some classrooms.

Our view of aesthetics refers to more than the common interpretation of beauty. It embodies all the senses into an internal experience. "The aesthetic experience is an intimate sensual one which also evokes a sense of freedom to explore and express" (Barter & DeCarion, 1994:7).

There is a moral perspective to the dimensions of fictional ethics and aesthetics. It is this notion of moral responsibility of an author that we believe connects aesthetics to ethics. As authors of texts or images we are constantly making moral decisions as we craft our work. This extends to educational literature where the author bears his or her social conscience to an audience.

[4]This section is paraphrased from another paper which was presented in 1994 at CSSE, Calgary, Alberta.

The Function of Fiction

As previously stated, the function of fiction in research is to allow researchers to tell the truth. It gives voice to those participants who may, in normal circumstances, be silenced. Although Langness and Frank (1981:93) make reference to biography and memoir, we believe that their statement "writers of fiction can tell about things that propriety demands be withheld" holds true for research in general.

Also, fiction serves as an alternate mode of expression when something cannot be expressed in nonfictitious terms. Eisner (1991:302) states it succinctly when he writes by limiting "the content of generalization to what can be said in the literal mode, we limit what can be said".

Finally, in relation to the crafting of a text, fiction allows freedom to write in a less conventional manner than would be expected of academic prose. In a previous paper (1994) we argue that "the choice of words when articulating detailed cultural descriptions and narratives by the author is what persuades the audience" of the author's presence at the research site, or as Geerz (1988) says, the author has "been there".

Conclusion

In the interest of time and space, we would briefly like to pose seminal questions for future discourse. With regards to authenticity, what about the integrity of the author? What happens to the integrity of the thesis as the degree of `fictionalizing' increases? What will the rhetoric be like? What forms of fiction, structure and context will be employed or even created? What about voice? Will that too be fiction, singular, multiple? What kind of style will develop as the author exercises options? What happens to the ethical review process? How does one maintain meaning in such a

context of change? Is narrative the most appropriate genre?

Finally, we are not advocating the fictionalizing of all research texts. The purpose and function is the determinant as to the use and degree of fiction. In view of the paradigmatic changes previously discussed, we are merely suggesting an alternative to meet the needs of those researchers wishing to articulate sensitive issues or convey what literal language cannot.

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